The mother(s) of all heroes: Six women volunteering to help Israel at war

HannaLee estimates that her “baking brigade” has provided more than 25,000 meals since the start of the war, and they’re not stopping.

NEW MOTHERS enjoy some pampering.
(photo credit: Lisa Rich)

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War is a terrible thing; it sends a tsunami of death, destruction, and depression across the entire nation. Ironically, it also plucks out of the population, seemingly at random, an entire host of heroic figures suddenly catapulted into the history books.

First and foremost, of course, are the combatants themselves, who place their lives on the line night and day as they battle to eliminate our enemies and protect us. The stories of these brave men and women are legion, and we sit enraptured, enthralled by the sacrifices they have made and the ordeals they have endured.

Included in their ranks are ordinary civilians who were suddenly thrust into the fray and the extraordinary courage they exhibited in the darkest of circumstances.

The next tier of heroism includes the many families, relatives, and friends of the wounded and kidnapped. Stoically, they go on with their lives day by day, minute by minute, either bearing the grief of a fallen loved one or suspended between fear and relief as they await word on the fate of those still in captivity. Indeed, the pain of not knowing can be even more severe than that dreadful, decisive knock on the door.

However, there is a third, ever-wider circle of this conflict: the multitude of individuals who have come forward to aid in the war effort – not for any selfish reason but because they care. They come from both here and abroad. They are young and old, and they seek no reward or recognition. They are diverse, but they have a common denominator: They want to contribute and express their love for the people and the State of Israel.

LAURA COWAN with her favorite Nahal soldier. (credit: ELISA SZKLANNY)

Standing at the forefront of these intrepid volunteers are – no surprise here – the ladies. Nothing exercises the female muscle of selfless sharing more than others in need. Who among us has not faced adversity and called out in desperation, “Mama!” “Ima!”? And so, I want to highlight six women who epitomize the high praise of the proverbial Eshet Chayil – Woman of Valor.

The ‘art’ of donating

I first met Laura Cowan online about a month after the war started. Laura is a gifted silversmith and artist, originally from Manchester, specializing in Judaica products.

She had designed a unique, spear-shaped mezuzah cover and asked me if it would be halachicly correct to place these in tanks or armored carriers. After

all, our soldiers do have to sleep in these vehicles on occasion. It was a fascinating question, and I researched it. It turns out that since the tank or APC is only used temporarily, it is not considered an actual home and so would not require a mezuzah. I complimented Laura on her idea and sent a prayer that hopefully, the war would not drag on much longer and our tankists would all soon be home.

Of course, that did not happen, and the war rages on. But Laura did not stop, either. She decided to put her jewelry-making on hold and dedicated herself – from 7 a.m. to midnight – to raising funds for whatever the soldiers needed.

It began with requests from the wives and girlfriends of reserve soldiers whose units were short on helmets, and then spread exponentially to providing boots, drones, headlamps, weapon sights, mattresses, socks, deodorant, and anything else that was either absolutely indispensable or just something that made life a lot easier.

In a kind of “underground pipeline,” one unit quickly tells another about an angel who can help. The message traveled to Facebook and WhatsApp groups and beyond, and as many as 10 units are placing their “orders” with Laura each day.

It’s become an ongoing debate as to whether or not the IDF is providing our fighting forces with everything they need. The army, needless to say, maintains that there is no equipment shortages whatsoever. But while that may be true regarding our regular forces, it doesn’t necessarily apply to the tens of thousands of reserve soldiers who were rapidly called into action en masse.

And so, “unofficially,” logistic officers are requesting and receiving all the various items that ease the discomfort of serving in extremely harsh

environments. Laura, with the help of her son, who is serving in a Nahal unit, has learned to do the necessary "triage" to determine what is most urgent. Medics and lone soldiers have first priority, and then she activates her support system to purchase the items. All products are Israeli-made.

On one of his short furloughs, Laura's son brought home a puppy the unit had found in Gaza. The dog was in poor condition, clearly mistreated, and covered with fleas and sores. Laura's family decided to adopt the puppy and named him Marley, after the late Jamaican reggae master musician Bob Marley (whose grandson recently had a bar mitzvah!). It seems appropriate that Bob Marley encapsulated our war spirit in one of his most famous songs:
"Get up, stand up, stand up for your right. Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight."

Donations via Boca Raton Synagogue: http://brsonline.org/amyisraelchai
Laura Cowan: info@lauracowan.com

'No one goes hungry on my watch!'

If, as Napoleon Bonaparte famously said, "an army marches on its stomach," it is women like HannaLee Kaplan-Arusy of the 4IDF Cooking, Baking, & Beyond group who are leading that march, filling countless stomachs of our angels in green.

Every week, a veritable army of 20 to 25 women – I'm proud to say that my wife, Susie, is one of them – assembles in HannaLee's Ra'anana home to prepare what seems like an endless supply of meals for combat soldiers. "It started simple, with assorted desserts and vegetarian meals, but I guess they must like our food," she says with a smile, "because the word spread among the units, and we now make 500 or more four-course meals for dozens of units every Shabbat."

These are not typical bland army rations. “Our soldiers want homemade food, just like Mama makes,” says HannaLee, so there is no skimping allowed. The extensive menu – which is completely of Mehadrin kosher quality, something important for observant units – consists of chicken, kabob, pasta bouillabaisse, meatballs, rice and lentils, couscous, challot, and cakes and cookies. Sometimes there are specialty items, such as Moroccan cookies for units that have a lot of Sephardim.

All the food is checked by a health and safety officer to be sure that no soldier will become ill from spoilage.

Vegetarian and gluten-free requests are also filled. Volunteer drivers take the food to bases in Gaza, Judea and Samaria, and the North.

HannaLee estimates that her “baking brigade” has provided more than 25,000 meals since the start of the war, and they’re not stopping. Meals cost NIS 80 to NIS 100 and are supported solely by donations from individuals who want to see our fighting forces fed. When the donations fall short, the ladies use their own money to make up the difference. Once in a while, when very generous donations come in, they support a gala BBQ for combat units, usually just before they go into action.

These events are always a “happening.” If you haven’t been to or supported one, you are missing something truly inspirational. Seeing our brave men and women enjoying a festive meal before entering into combat truly warms the soul.

HannaLee is devoted wholeheartedly to our troops, as are her husband, who served 14 years in the IDF, and her six children (all of whom live at home!). “It’s true, we’re sending our soldiers food,” she says, “but along with that – and no

less important – we're sending them a message that we support them, that we're thinking of them every day, and that we're grateful for all they are doing for Am Yisrael [the Jewish people]. We consider this to be our miluim [IDF reserve duty], our service and contribution to the cause."

The youngest of nine children – the only Sabra of the family – HannahLee traveled the world extensively. Certified in Chinese medicine and Shiatsu, she lived in America and Switzerland before returning to Israel to stay. She was also an EL AL flight attendant, which may have helped her to learn the true meaning of what might very well be her motto and her mission: "They also serve... who serve!"

Donations to 4IDF Cooking, Baking, & Beyond: www.tengav.org/off-line-giving/; specify "Cooking for Soldiers"
Info: https://www.4idf-cooking-baking.com/; 4IDFcookingbaking@proton.me

A house is not a home... without a mezuzah

Take one very innovative person who cares deeply about others, add a brilliant idea and lots of energy, and you create what has come to be called the Worldwide Mezuzah Project.

Susie Gitler, who commutes between Teaneck, New Jersey, and Israel, was crocheting and needlepointing with a group of women at Ra'anana's Ohel Ari (the city's largest synagogue, which, I'm proud to say, is dedicated to the memory of our son Ari HY"D) when a thought popped into her head.

"What will happen when the homes destroyed on Oct. 7 are rebuilt?" she mused. "They're all going to need mezuzot! Why can't we needlepoint the covers for those mezuzot?" The other women enthusiastically agreed to help,

but when Susie learned there were 3,000 homes that would need “coverage,” she understood that this was going to take more than just a few sewing circles.

So, she spread the word, and, like so many other worthwhile projects, groups all over the planet jumped on the idea and wanted to contribute. A WhatsApp group was started, and the buzz went viral. Women’s – and men’s! – groups, synagogues, camps, and schools’ hessed (good deeds) programs all joined in, from Israel to Canada to Mexico and beyond. Hundreds of people participated, and now Part I of the project – making the covers – has been completed.

Part II now remains: parchments with the required Torah verses. Two paragraphs from the Shema must be written by certified scribes (sofrim), and that is a challenging endeavor. Enough scribes must be found to do the writing, and funds must be raised to pay them (each klaf, or parchment, costs around $50).

Luckily, Susie has a perfect partner. Her son Joseph is the founder of Leket, which utilizes food resources in Israel to feed thousands; he is one of the country’s most respected nonprofit professionals. Joseph agreed to spearhead the effort to raise the funds necessary to complete the parchments, hopefully by September 1.

Amid this amazing project, the Gitler family suffered a tragic loss. Joseph’s son-in-law (Susie’s grandson-in-law), Sgt.-Maj. David Schwartz, 26, was killed in the southern Gaza Strip on January 8. David was an exceptional scholar and human being; I would go as far as to say he was a “living parchment,” with the words of the Torah inscribed on his very soul. Susie’s leadership in the Mezuzah Project became a wonderful, therapeutic bonding experience that has created an enormous amount of positive energy and helped her “live again” after her loss.

We pray that the survivors of the barbaric Hamas assault will also live again – in rebuilt communities and homes that proudly bear a new mezuzah.

Donations to the Mezuzah Project:
my.israelgives.org/en/fundme/MezuzahProject

Donations for parchments: www.leket.org/en/online-donation/

I love you, baby!

As we naturally focus on the fighters in Gaza, there is a danger that we might lose sight of the home front, the wives of our soldiers who now have to fend for their families by themselves. It's a double challenge: being without your partner, worrying about him every minute, and, at the same time, dealing with young kids who need constant attention. What to do?

Enter a devoted group of "mommy's helpers," whose passion is to care for the women who are raising the next generation of Israelis. Here is the story of three of them.

Sarit Rapp and Lisa Goldenhersh have a lot of experience with newborns and beyond. Sarit ran The Mommy Bar Center for postpartum mothers, which provides emotional support and ongoing classes on various topics, such as teaching mothers how to create healthy sleep schedules, and swaddling techniques. Lisa teaches children with learning disabilities and is a hydrotherapist for autistic children and those with physical disabilities. Sarit and Lisa each has five children, several of whom are serving in the army.

Together, they formed the Hug an IDF Mom and Newborn Project, traveling the length and breadth of the country to hotels and private homes accommodating

evacuees. They deliver gift packages filled with high-quality toys, blankets, baby goods, cosmetics, etc., to new mothers, sharing the needs and concerns of the “women in waiting.”

Lisa tells about their visit to a woman with a six-day-old baby. She discovered she was pregnant on the day that her husband was critically wounded, so she spent her entire pregnancy caring for a severely injured husband, and then nursing a newborn. They named their daughter Hallel, in praise to God for bringing the father and the baby to life.

Tragically, some of these new mothers have become war widows. When Sarit and Lisa went to visit Anat, whose husband, David, from the elite Shaldag Unit, was killed on Oct. 7, she spent an hour telling them that this was a time for emunah (faith) and solidarity, not surrender.

“Most of the time, we come to cheer them up,” says Lisa, “but in the end, they are the ones who comfort and inspire us by their determination to go on. They are literally devoting their bodies to the future of Israel, no less than their combat husbands.”

Adds Sarit: “What makes our project special is that everything that goes into the packages is wrapped in love. These moms truly deserve the world. They are lionesses, and they represent the continuity of Am Yisrael. They are proof positive that we are a nation like no other; we are strong and will overcome all the challenges that stand before us.”

Lisa Rich is a sought-after photographer who has photographed more than 400 families throughout the country. After her husband was drafted to Gaza on Oct. 7, she understood that this was not a time for family photos, as the men were largely away at war, and the rest of the family was in no mood to

celebrate. So, because she loved meeting people and learning their stories, she started the #soldierstory project, documenting families across Israel and sharing their Oct. 7 stories on her Instagram page.

“But,” she said, “I realized I could be doing so much more. People wanted to feel even more connected. People wanted to donate, to help organize, to purchase and send over things for the army wives here. And so, over the last nine months, I have put together numerous events with the help of my online community of over 10,000 followers, mostly women, from all over the globe. I believe God has helped me create this initiative and that I was meant to be an instrument to be used during war to help bring happiness, hope, and achdut [unity].”

Women in the US, Canada, and the UK joined Lisa in creating fundraising events and volunteered to help more and more army wives. The events included, for example, Pottery & Brunch for 45 army wives from Gush Etzion; a concert with Akiva for 220 army wives from all over Israel; and Aromatherapy Workshops & Baby Showers for army wives with husbands in Gaza.

She also connected with women who were evacuated from Sderot and did photos hoots for them in the beautiful Jerusalem forest. When they were finally allowed to go back home, she organized a welcome home event for 150 of the Sderot ladies and 150 Anglo ladies. “We had a dinner, DJ, and beautiful gifts,” she says. “It was an incredible night of simcha, joy, and achdut.”

“I’ve spoken to hundreds of army wives over the past nine months. Oct. 7 hit us hard and changed us forever – changed the way we see the world, changed our family dynamic, changed the way we think, and changed what we do in our day-to-day lives. Until we have real peace, I just want to give these special

women their own moments of peace and happiness amid the chaos they – and we – are living in."

Donations to Hug an IDF Mom and Newborn: bit.ly/IDF-Mom

Lisa Goldenhersh: morahg@hotmail.com

Sarit Rapp: saritrapp@gmail.com.

Lisa Rich: www.instagram.com/lisarichphoto/

How to donate

PEOPLE OFTEN ask me where they can send donations for the war effort and which individuals and organizations are trustworthy. A recent exposé on Channel 12 about a dishonest former IDF officer who was collecting significant funds and equipment ostensibly for soldiers but keeping them for himself was a cautionary tale.

We should be very careful regarding where we place our limited resources; even some of the larger, national and international "alphabet soup" organizations may divert a sizable portion of donated funds to salaries and "administration." (I suggest accessing the salaries of so-called nonprofit personnel online to see where some of the money is going.) I am completely confident that the organizations cited in this article will use all funds they receive solely for the projects described.

In conclusion, we can take great pride in the fact that we are a society of givers. We love to give; we may even live to give! It's in our God-given DNA; the attributes of generosity and hessed are activated the moment we sense that we can help a fellow human being. It is this incredible personality trait that

binds us to one another with love and will keep us together throughout this crisis and into a glorious future.□

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